

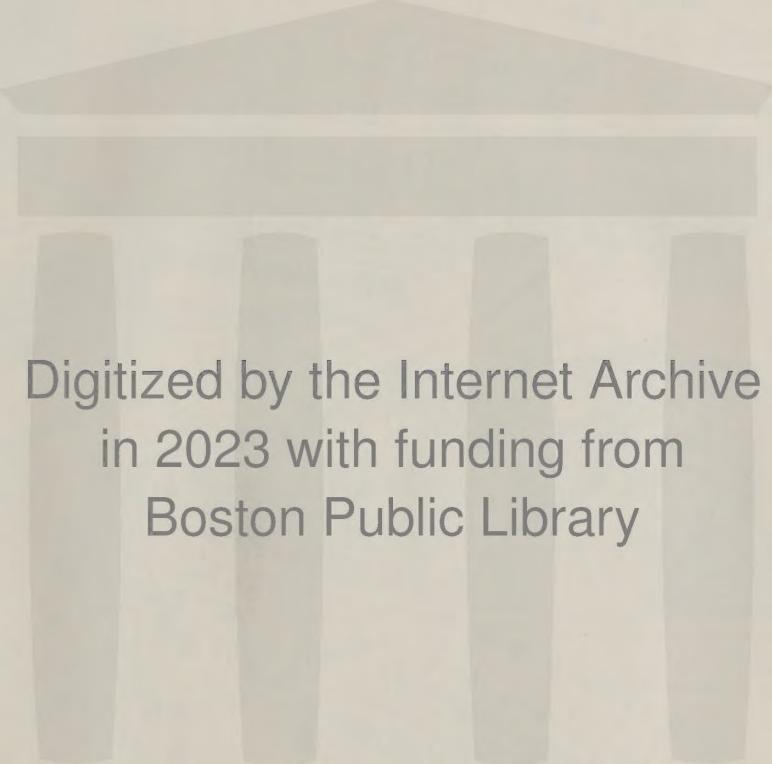
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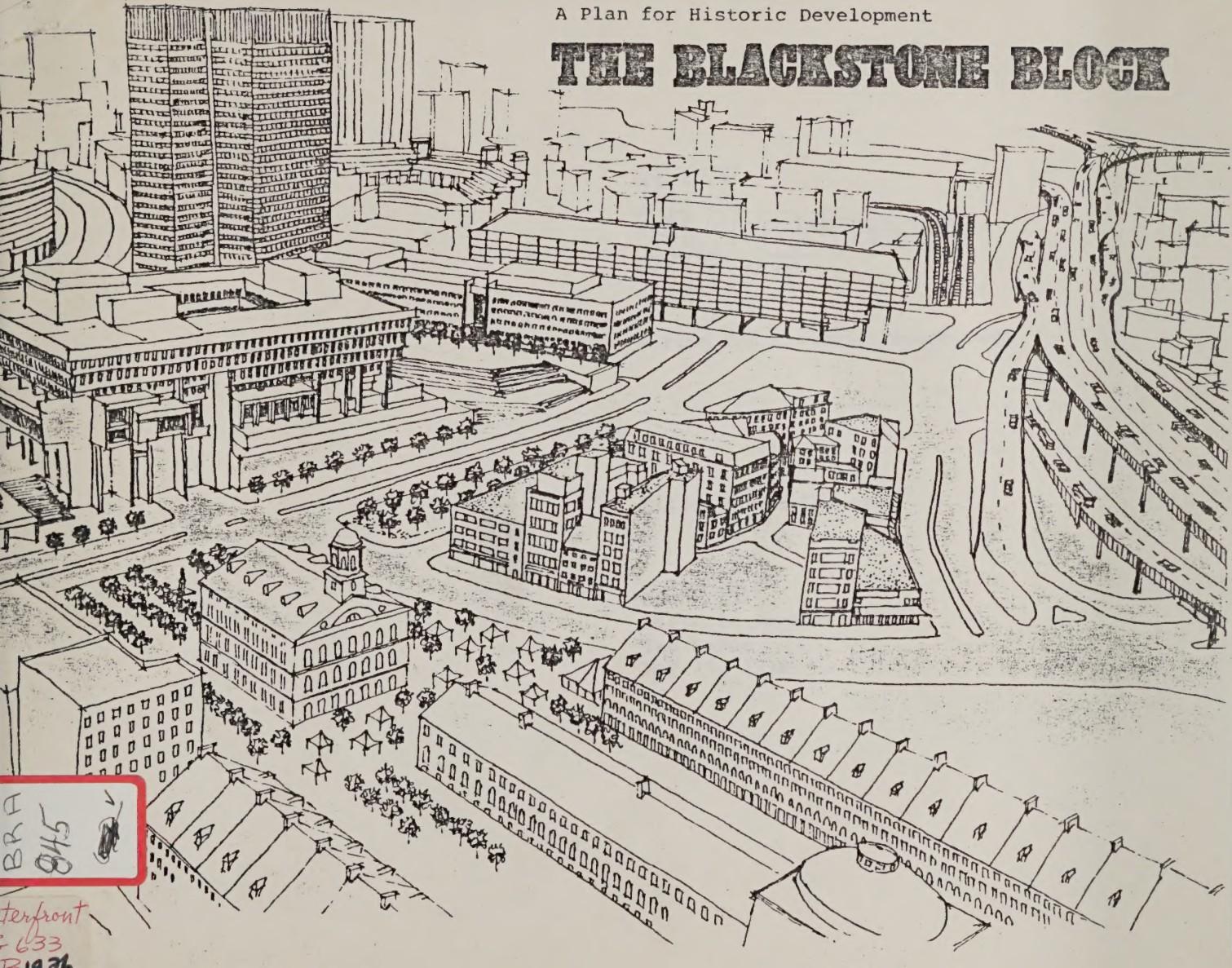


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A Plan for Historic Development

THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK



BRA
845

terfront
633
1931

THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK

A Plan for Historic Development

Miguel Gomez-Ibanez

Arch. 752
Historic Preservation
Ted Sande
May 14, 1976

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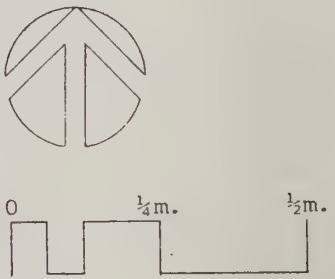
CHARLES RIVER

BOSTON INNER HARBOR

THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK

DOWNTOWN
BOSTON

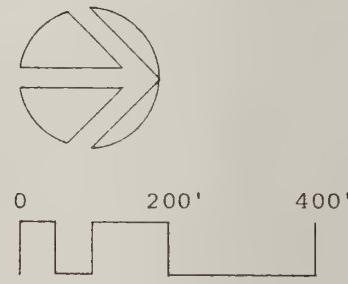
SOUTH
BOSTON



THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK



BLACKSTONE BLOCK/
FANEUIL HALL AREA



INTRODUCTION

The name of Blackstone is synonymous with the begining of Boston. Rev. William Blackstone was the first white settler credited with making his home, in 1625, on the site of the 20th century city.

Blackstone had arrived in the new world two years earlier as chaplain of the Robert Gorge expedition, which established the first English settlement in the region. This small group of explorers soon abandoned their settlement to return to the comforts of England, leaving Blackstone and perhaps a few others to live as hermits on the newly claimed land. Blackstone wandered up the coast and finally chose to built his hut near a spring on the west slope of Beacon Hill.

Five years later, it was Blackstone who persuaded Gov. John Winthrop and his Massachusetts Bay Company to establish their permanent settlement near his spring.

Blackstone recognized the Shawmut peninsula as a site which would be appropriate for a city. Connected to the mainland by a very narrow neck, it was easily defensible. The peninsula was also marked by a large cove capable of sheltering ships. The cove was flanked on either side by high promontories upon which could be posted sentries, thus providing protection by sea.

The topography of Boston today, however, bears virtually no resemblance to

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

that which Blackstone found. Over the years hills have been leveled and bays and coves filled in to achieve the outline we recognize as contemporary Boston.

The desire to expand and regularize the topography, with the devastating fires which periodically leveled Boston, and the pressures of a rapidly expanding mercantile society, combined to wipe out all but a few traces of the early settlement. The Blackstone Block is one of these few remaining traces.

There are a number of reasons suggested for the survival of the Blackstone Block in the reorganized and rebuilt Boston of today, but none is as convincing as the argument that the block survives purely by accident.

One might think that the form of the Blackstone Block has been preserved because it was originally dictated by natural features. The block can be recognized in the earliest descriptions of the colonial settlement because it occupied a narrow stretch of useable land bounded on the east by the harbor and on the west by Mill Cove. To the north was a marshy area through which a creek meandered. A respect for natural constraints, however, was not a characteristic of early Bostonians, for other, much larger topographical features of the Shawmut peninsula were readily obliterated by the rapidly prospering settlement.

It could also be argued that these three natural boundaries of the Blackstone Block were respected because they combined to provide



Boston with an economic asset: water power. But the financial benefits derived from Mill Creek's tidal mill race were relatively short lived, subject to a changing economy and technology. Mill Creek had lost its value well before 1800.

It seems more probable that the Blackstone Block's proximity to an area of historic and cultural importance to Boston was a major factor in its preservation. While there are no revolutionary shrines or objects of significance in the block itself, nearby stands Faneuil Hall, a symbol whose preservation is of great importance to Bostonians.

Whatever the reasons, the Blackstone Block remains today as a reminder of 17th century Boston. It has been continually altered over the years, but not fundamentally changed.

Its physical form is, in a real sense, an encapsulation of Boston's history. By examining the various stages of development through which the block has passed, one can begin to identify and sort out the many facets of its kaleidoscopic image.

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The focus of Boston's early years was Great Cove, also known as Town Cove, which provided a natural refuge for ships. It was about this center that the first plots were laid out, and before 10 years had passed, written descriptions of the settlement listed the streets that define the block today.

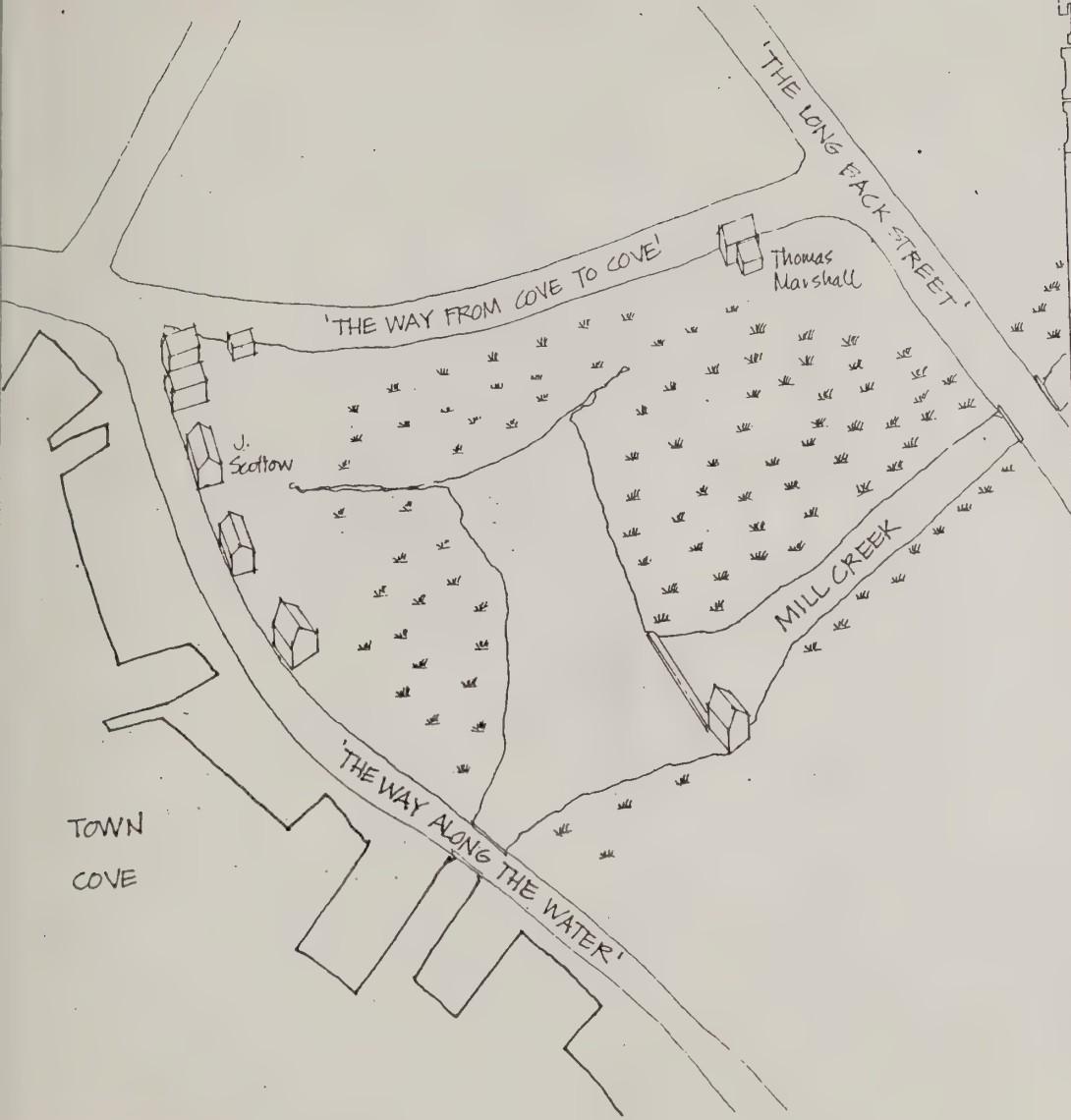
Between what are now North and Hanover streets ran a small creek which was enlarged in 1633 and made to connect the two coves. Mill Cove was then cut off from the sea by a causeway (now Causeway street) and became Mill Pond- a pond which, when drained by the outgoing tide, provided a source of tidal water power.

But while a mill was soon operating beside Mill Creek, the focus of the block was still North street and the dock. This was the first area developed in the block.

Although in 1640 the center of the block was still unuseable marsh land (see 1640 map) pressure was already felt to develop this land so close to the dock. In 1644 the town began to release the commonage to individuals for development, and they immediately began to fill in the swamp.

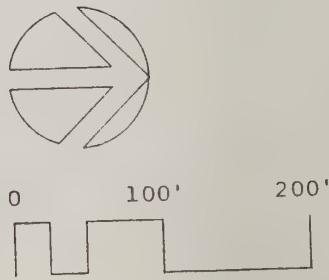
By the end of the century, the lanes within the Blackstone Block had been laid out. First to appear in records is Marshall Lane, donated to the town as a

THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK



1640 MASSING

SOURCE: (26)



shortcut in 1652. Scottow's Alley was laid out in 1677, and Marsh Lane first appears in 1678. Finally, in 1699, Salt Lane was established, thus virtually completing the street pattern as we know it today.

The buildings of this period are known to have been two stories, of wood and roughcast, typical of medieval England. None of these buildings, however, has survived. It is only in the winding pattern of alleys and lanes within the Blackstone Block that one can still read the 17th century. This pattern is dramatically extended upward into space by the walls of the larger scale buildings which now occupy the block, straining to conform to the pattern established by earlier generations.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The construction of the immense Long Wharf in 1711 reflected the rapid growth of Boston as the region's trading center. While the new docking facility eclipsed the importance of the old Town Dock, the Blackstone Block was still close enough to the mercantile center of gravity to be a prime area for development. The accompanying massing map based on a 1722 survey shows the rapid increase in development that occurred in the first quarter century. By 1800 the marsh would be completely filled in and virtually the entire available area built upon.

Faneuil Hall, constructed nearby in 1742, was to become the focus of the town's social and political activity, serving as the meeting house during the formative years of the revolution. On the southwest corner of Union and Hanover streets was the home of Josiah Franklin, candlemaker and father of Benjamin. Within the block was the headquarters of the prorevolutionary broadside "The Massachusetts Spy", later forced to cease publication in Boston by the British, and the home of John Hancock.

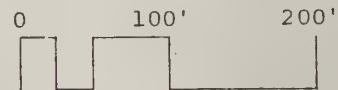
The Blackstone Block was a commercial center, with most buildings containing craftsmen, small businesses or taverns on the first floor and dwellings above. Two of these structures survive, the Union

THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK



1722 MASSING

SOURCE: (10)



Oyster House (41 - 43 Union St.) and the Ebenezer Hancock House (10 Marshall St.), once owned by his brother, John.

The Union Oyster House, a 3½ story gambrel roofed brick building, is believed to have been built prior to 1714. It was the home, from 1771 to 1775, of Isaiah Thomas and his "The Massachusetts Spy". Inflammatory articles from the Spy were quoted in newspapers throughout the 13 colonies, and the staff of delivery boys was believed to double as a messenger staff for the revolutionaries. The building was later a dry goods store (1780) and in 1826 became the oyster house of today.

The Ebenezer Hancock House site was inherited by John Hancock at his uncle's death. Hancock constructed the present building shortly after 1767, and later gave it to his brother, Ebenezer, who held the patronage job of paymaster of the Eastern Continental Army. In 1778, Ben Franklin in Paris negotiated a loan from

Louis XVI of 2 million silver crowns which was stored in the basement of 10 Marshall St. after its arrival in Boston. The first floor was adapted for commercial use as early as 1796.

Beside this house, along the east side of Creek Square, John Hancock constructed several brick houses in 1785. Known as Hancock Row, they were demolished in 1942.

Also remaining from the 18th century is the Boston Stone, a puzzling cannon ball like object set into the wall of 9 Marshall

St. It is a spherical grinding stone from an old paint mill, first placed in a similar position in the house that pre-dated the present structure, by Thomas Child, a painter, in 1737. The stone has been adopted as the zero milestone of Boston, from which distances are measured, indicating the central role which the Blackstone Block has played in the history of Boston.

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

If the 18th century had been a period of dramatic growth for Boston in terms of power and prestige, the 19th century was one of dramatic growth in size.

Boston's population, which in the preceding century had only slowly grown from 9,000 to 18,000, now began to swell with the arrival of waves of immigrants. By 1825, after just a quarter century, the population had tripled reaching 58,000. This was the century, in the words of Boston historian Walter Muir Whitehill, of "cutting down the hills to fill in the coves.". It was the century of Bulfinch and Back Bay, the century that established the shape and character of Boston as it is popularly known today.

The first of these vast earth moving projects, the lowering of Beacon Hill by 60 feet to fill in the 70 acre Mill Pond, was begun in 1804 and had an immediate impact on the Blackstone Block. In 1824, with workmen still carting fill in the direction of the Mill Pond, work began on a still larger project bordering the block. First the Town Dock, and then the entirety of Great Cove were filled in to add another 112 acres to the city. By 1833 the obsolete mill race had disappeared and in its place was Blackstone street, thus establishing the boundaries of the block as they are today.

The establishment of Blackstone street greatly reduced the size of the building lots on that edge of the block, thus necessitating much new construction. But more importantly, it changed the orientation of those lots. When the first new structure was completed on Blackstone street in 1835, just 2 years after the filling of the creek began, it faced the new street rather than Creek Square.

During the next 20 years the buildings were replaced along the entire length of the street. The structures were similar in style; economical common bond brick buildings with straight brownstone lintels and a height of either 4 or 5 stories.

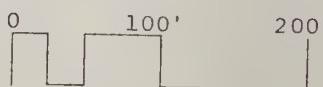
The upheaval of the 19th century left the Blackstone Block changed in 3 major ways. The first of these changes was a change in the character of the block. The Blackstone Block of the 18th century had been an integrated neighborhood of commercial and residential uses, characterized by 3 story buildings with commercial activity on the street level and dwellings above. During the 19th century the majority of these buildings were replaced by 4 and 5 story buildings whose commercial character undermined the quality of the block as a residential neighborhood. The craftsmen and small businessmen were replaced by

THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK



1850 MASSING

SOURCE: (29), (30)
(33), (34)
(36)



larger commercial concerns, primarily food markets and clothing stores.

A second contribution of the 19th century was that of a characteristic style. The area grew to be dominated by Federal style buildings because so many buildings had to be built during the expansion years of 1800 to 1850. The typical Federal features- common bond brick, a gable roof with small cornice, flared lintels and square windows on the top floor, are all seen in the 3 buildings between 13 and 21 Union street. (Building elevations are included in the next section) Later buildings adopted the square lintels of the Greek Revival style; 20-22 North street is an excellent example. This neoclassical influence saw its greatest expression in the renovation of Faneuil Hall by Bulfinch in 1805 and the nearby Quincy or Faneuil Hall Markets, by Alexander Parris in 1825.

The final legacy of the 19th century was a trend toward the consolidation of smaller parcels of land into larger building lots which has continued into the 20th century. An early example of this economic drive to consolidate land is the Union Block building, a triangular structure at 45-55 Union St. Some of the larger buildings built later in the century were not able to adapt as gracefully to their irregular sites.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The economic decline of the waterfront area in the 20th century has greatly affected the Blackstone Block. The block reached its peak of development in 1928, with the construction of its most recent (and least distinguished) building.

But shortly thereafter, rapidly declining property values forced many property owners to abandon the upper floors of their buildings, and later to have them removed. (compare the 1930 and 1976 massing diagrams).

More recently, the construction in 1951 of an elevated expressway along the east side of Blackstone street caused this economic decline to accelerate.

It was not until the new Government Center development was underway in the 1960's that the downward trend in property values was halted. The slump that had hit in the 1930's, however, had already left its mark on the block. In addition to the lowering in height of many buildings, some of historical interest were removed entirely, including a blacksmith shop dating from the early 19th century and the 18th century Hancock Row, both along Creek Square.

THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK

1930 MASSING

SOURCE: (21), (29)
(37)

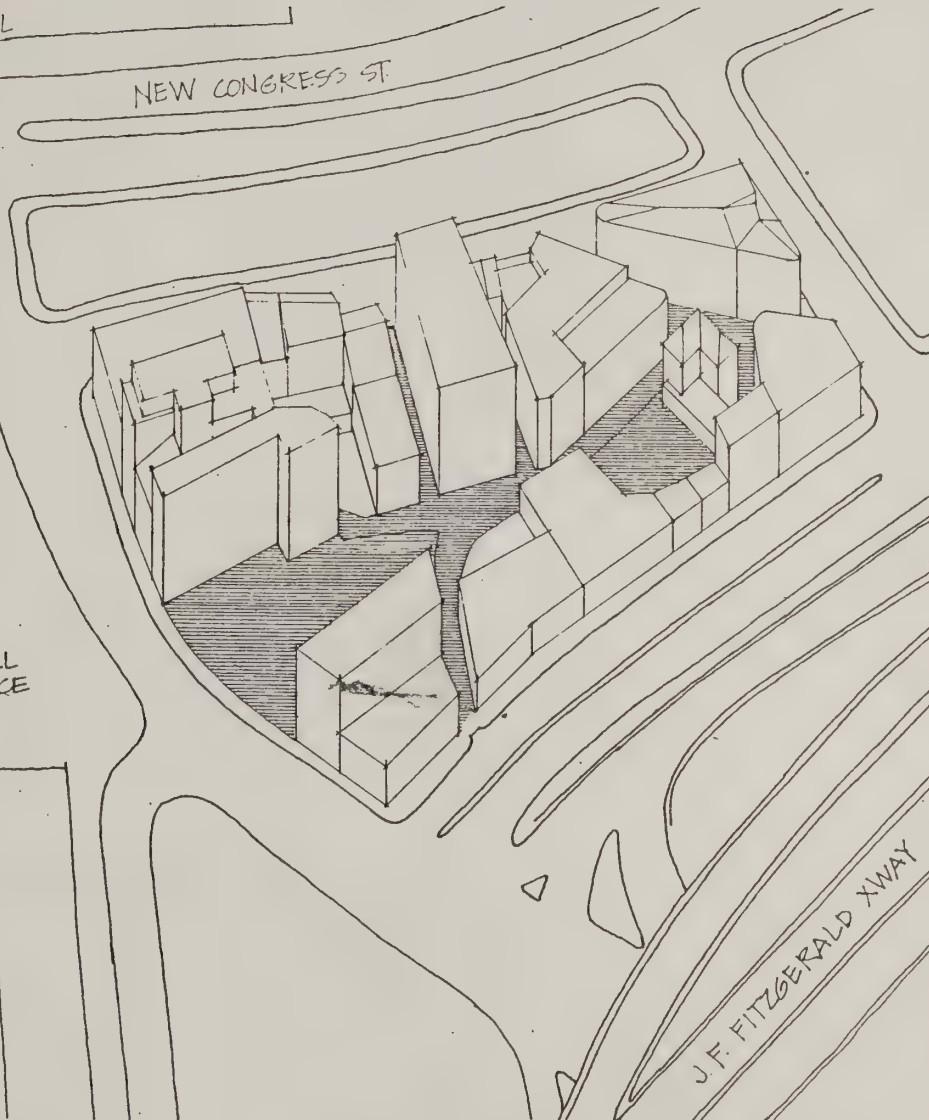


NEW CITY HALL

NEW CONGRESS ST.

DOCK
SQUARE

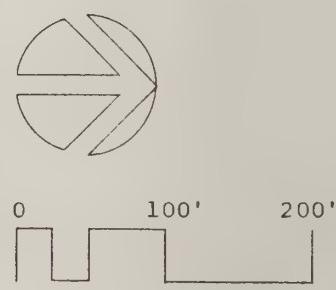
FANEUIL HALL
MARKET PLACE



THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK

1976 MASSING

SOURCE: Site visit



SUMMARY

The 17th century created the Blackstone Block, and left its imprint on the block in the form of a street pattern to which succeeding generations have had to adapt.

The 18th century saw the development of the of the interior lots of the block. The remaining buildings of this period, even though some exist only as rear annexes to larger buildings facing the main streets, represent the highest architectural quality of the the block, and a scale most appropriate to its intimate interior spaces.

The 19th century, a period of intense development, left the Blackstone Block with buildings of a larger, commercial scale oriented outwards, toward to major streets. These buildings typify the honest, straightforward approach to commercial architecture of the Federal period which sets the character of the entire waterfront area.

The 20th century passed the Blackstone Block by. Its most significant legacy (to date) is the removal of the upper stories of many buildings in the block and the razing of others. Buildings built during the early part of this century are of undistinguished quality.

While the Blackstone Block may be a delight to the architectural historian, it is likely to be experienced somewhat differently by the average pedestrian, who has to pick his way through trash and debris down dark and often smelly alleys.

But a sense of Boston's past, while not always apparent under present conditions, is still there.

Today most people approach the Blackstone Block from Union Street. Directly behind City Hall, it is the block's most visible edge. Most of the Union street properties have been recently rehabilitated or modernized, due to this proximity to Government Center. Some, such as the Union Block (45-55), were rehabilitated with considerable attention to architectural detail. Other properties, however, like the 4 story Federal Charlestown Savings Bank which was "colonialized" down to 2 stories, were not so fortunate.

On Union street is one of the 2 18th century structures remaining on the block, the Union Oyster House(41-43). It is a Boston institution, whose reputation is closely linked to its architecture.

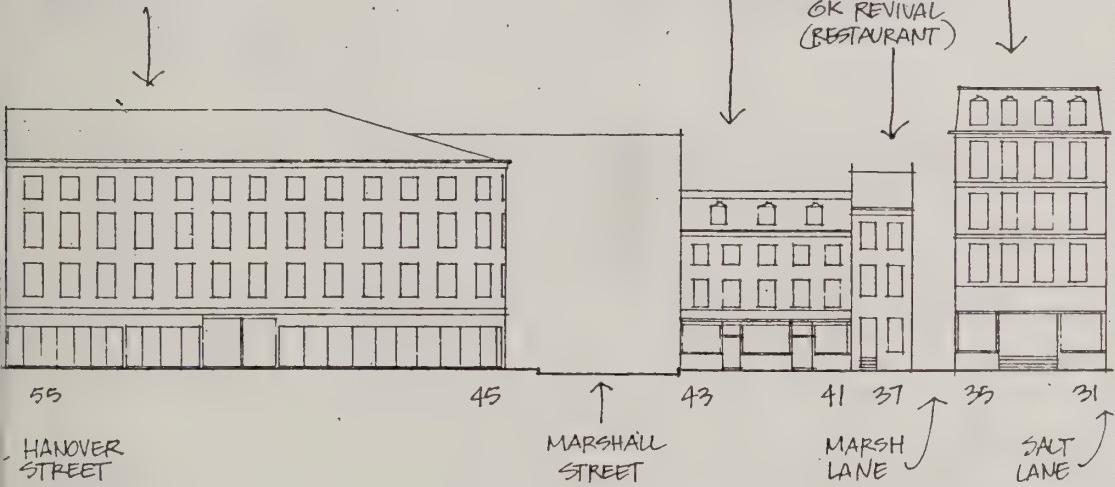
The "exceptional" building on Union street is 31-35, a mostly unused 5 story building with a masonry facade of Italianate design. It is the tallest building on the street, but its decorative facade, alien in both style and material to the other buildings on the street, makes it loom even

EXISTING CONDITIONS

THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK

1844
"UNION BLOCK"

MOST ELEGANT ADAPTATION
OF LARGE BUILDING TO SITE
ASSEMBLED OF SMALL,
IRREG. PARCELS
GAMBREL/HIP/GABEL ROOF
& CURVED END ADAPT
TO ACUTE ANGLE
(BAR)

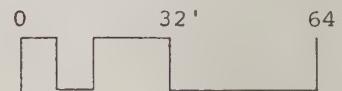


1713
UNION OYSTER HOUSE SINCE
1826 #43 ADDED TO #41
ABOUT 1725, FIRST FLOOR
FAÇADE & DORMERS C 1790
INTERIOR IS 19th C.
NATIONAL REGISTER
(RESTAURANT)

1861
ITALIANATE MASONRY
FAÇADE W/ DEEP RELIEF
MAKES BUILDING UNUSUAL
FOR THIS AREA IT
REPLACED MANY SMALL
STRUCTURES FACING
LANES. REAR HAS
GRANITE POST & BEAM
STORE FRONT.
(WHOLESALE SUPPLIES)

c 1830
ELONGATED
GK REVIVAL
(RESTAURANT)

UNION STREET
ELEVATION



THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK

1822

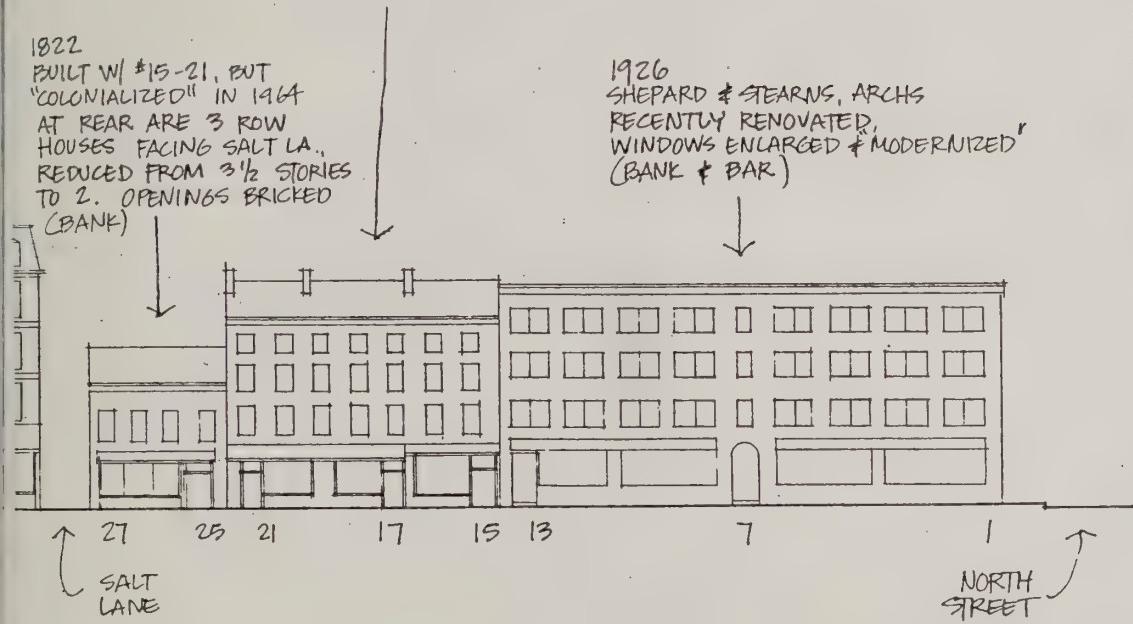
#15-21 BUILT TOGETHER, BEST FEDERAL ARCH. LEFT ON BLOCK, W/ FLARED GRANITE LINTELS, BUILT AS SHOPS W/ RESIDENCE ABOVE ANNEXED TO REAR ARE 2, 3 STORY ROW HOUSES FACING SCOTT ALLEY (RESTAURANT, HARDWARE STORE)

1822

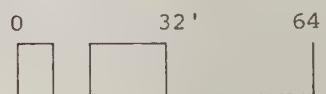
BUILT WI #15-21, BUT "COLONIALIZED" IN 1964 AT REAR ARE 3 ROW HOUSES FACING SALT LA., REDUCED FROM 3½ STORIES TO 2. OPENINGS BRICKED (BANK)

1926

SHEPARD & STEARNS, ARCHS RECENTLY RENOVATED, WINDOWS ENLARGED & MODERNIZED (BANK & BAR)



UNION STREET ELEVATION



larger. The Adams, Howard and Greeley study of the area in 1959 recommended that the building be razed and in its place a park be created which would link the interior of the Blackstone Block with Government Center.

Some form of rehabilitation now seems more likely, because of its relatively large size and prime location. Demolition seems unlikely because present zoning precludes the construction of a larger building on the site.

With the restoration of Faneuil Hall and the Faneuil Hall Markets, the North Street edge of the Blackstone Block will soon be as desireable for development as the Union street edge has been. Two buildings have already been rehabilitated, (18 and 20), but 2 others are currently abandoned, and owned by the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA). The demolition of 4 buildings in 1974 by the BRA has left a large (by Blackstone Block standards) empty lot facing the north side of Faneuil Hall. This site is likely to be developed soon after the opening by the Rouse Company of the restored shopping center across the street. Its size and key location make this lot a crucial factor in the future of the Blackstone Block.

Turning onto Blackstone Street, the shabby, single story produce markets stand

in contrast to the larger scale of North street. On Blackstone street was a row of 4 and 5 story commercial brick structures built between 1835 and 1850, a period of great prosperity for the block.

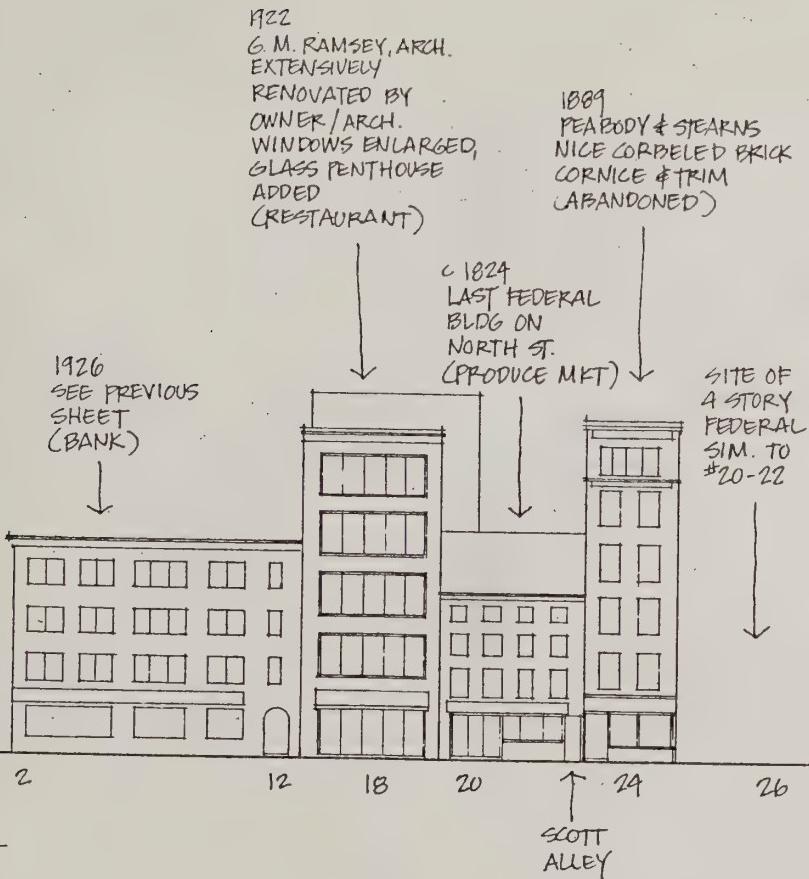
Virtually no hint remains of their original 19th century design, reduced as they are to single story sheds. These properties were those hit hardest by the economic decline which began shortly after 1930.

But while it may be the most physically decayed edge of the block, Blackstone street's produce markets provide the only real street life in the area. Fruits and vegetables are piled high along the sidewalk and in the street. The presence of the expressway on the opposite side of the street, while felt in financial terms by the property owners, is not noticeable to the pedestrian in this market atmosphere.

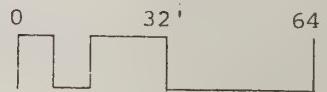
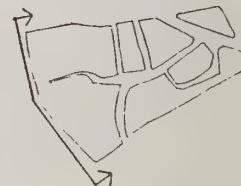
One building on Blackstone street, Pete's Pub, (108-112) has managed to retain its original height. With the exception of the first floor facade, it is little changed. With this lone building a glimpse can be seen of the mid 19th century streetscape of Blackstone street.

The fact that these decaying buildings are so close to the restoration of the Faneuil Hall Markets suggests that pressure for redevelopment will come soon. So little is left of the historic

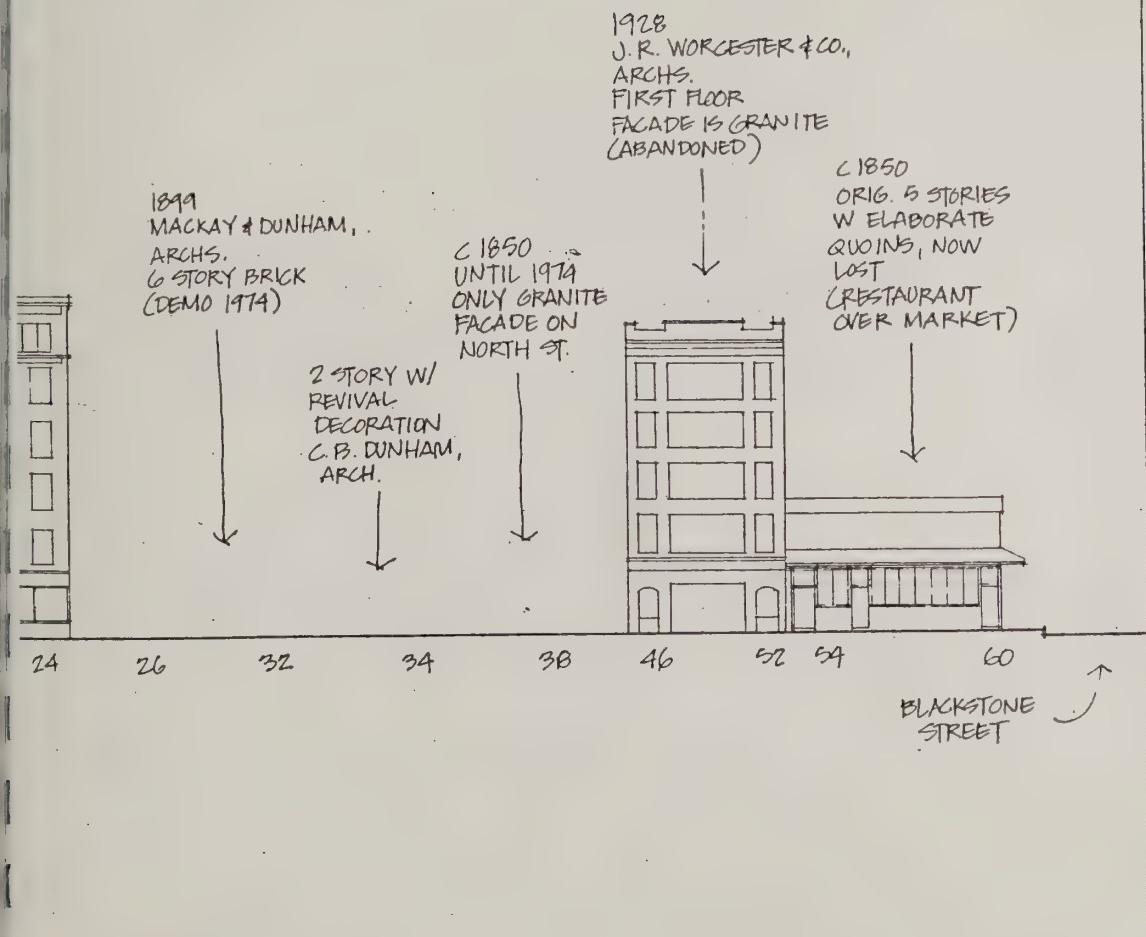
THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK



NORTH STREET
ELEVATION



THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK



THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK

c 1850
SECOND FLOOR GIVES
SOME IDEA OF ORIG.
STRUCTURE, THOUGH
WINDOWS BRICKED IN
(RESTAURANT OVER
PRODUCE MARKET)



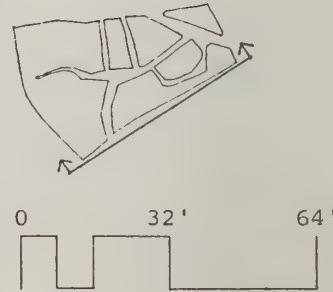
NORTH
STREET

CREEK
SQUARE

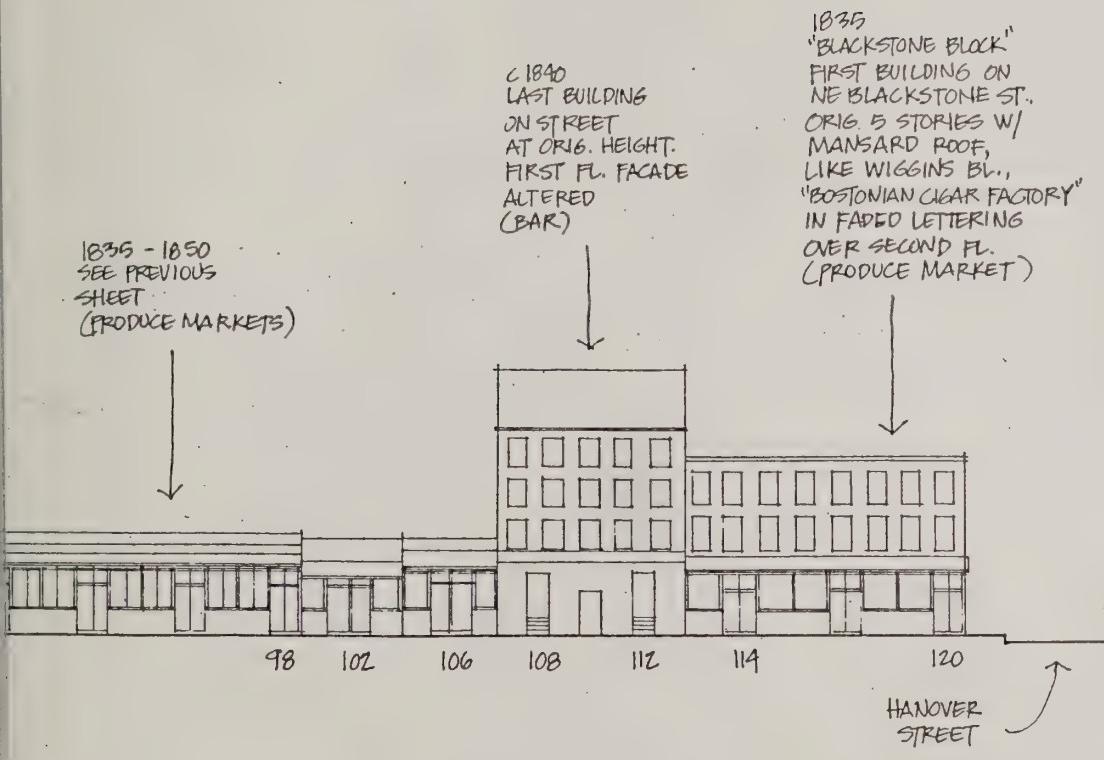
1835 - 1850
THESE BUILDINGS, ORIG. 4-5 STORIES,
BRICK W/ BROWNSTONE LINTEL,
MANSARD ROOF, BUILT AFTER
FILLING OF CREEK, 1833, AND
REDUCED TO SINGLE STORY
BETWEEN 1940 & 1965
(PRODUCE MARKETS W/
SIDEWALK RETAIL AREA)



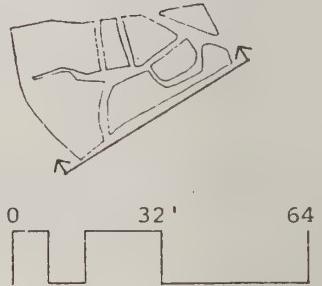
BLACKSTONE STREET
ELEVATION



THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK



BLACKSTONE STREET
ELEVATION



structure that restoration or rehabilitation seem impossible. The sites, even when combined, still create such a small and irregular package that the economic feasibility of new construction remains a question, and the buildings may remain for many years in their present state.

This may change if a proposal to rebuilt a depressed expressway is implemented, but it now seems unlikely that the necessary money will be available.

On Fridays and Saturdays, the produce market on Blackstone street spills over onto Hanover Street and the parking lot immediately adjacent. During the summer months these produce vendors in the pushcart market are joined by antique and curio dealers and local craftsmen who move into the area to sell their wares.

The buildings on this side of the Blackstone Block which form the backdrop for this flea market have not been allowed to deteriorate to the extent of those on Blackstone street. At the corner stands the Blackstone Block (151-153 Hanover), reduced somewhat from its original height and modernized with little attention to historic detail.

Across Marshall street, however, the Wiggins Block (147-149 Hanover) has maintained its original height. The widening of Hanover street in 1868 by 20 feet drastically reduced the size of the original

building built in the 1830's to its irregular shape today.

Marshall Street, one edge of the Wiggins Block, is the narrowest street in the Blackstone Block open to vehicular traffic. It is also unique for it is a portion of the Freedom Trail, a tourist route that leads visitors on foot to the points of historical interest scattered throughout downtown Boston.

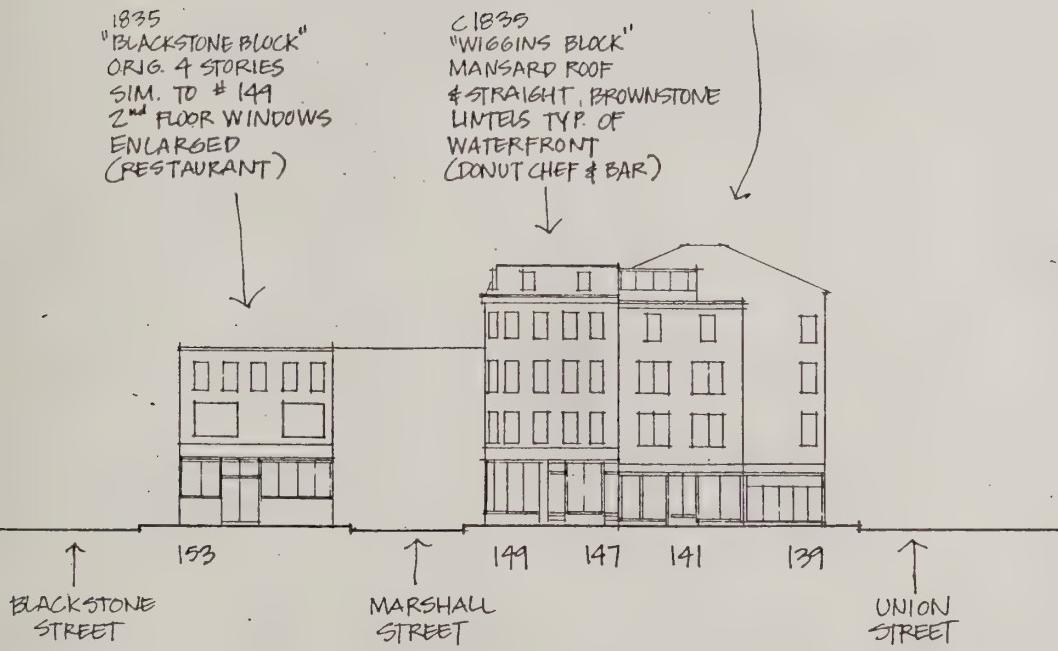
The fact that two buildings on Marshall street have been reduced in height from 5 stories to 3 over the years is not noticeable because, due to the narrow width of the street, one cannot get far enough away from the buildings for a clear view. The reduced scale of these buildings is in a sense fortunate, for they are now more in keeping with the lower 18th century Hancock House at 10 Marshall St. The house viewed today seems crowded by its neighbors, but not dwarfed by them.

Because none of the storefronts on Marshall street have been sealed in favor of an orientation toward Union street, there is much to see on the short stretch of the street, and the pedestrian experience is close to what it must have been in 18th century Boston streets.

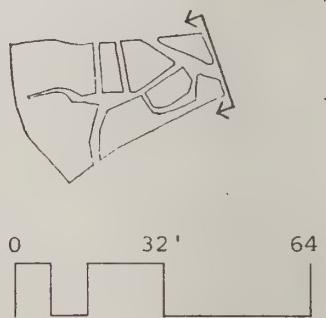
Shops no longer open onto Marsh Lane - they have long been swallowed up by the large buildings on either side. The 11

THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK

c1835
DRASTICALLY REDUCED
IN SIZE BY WIDENING
OF HANOVER ST BY 20'
IN 1868
ANNEXED BY #147



HANOVER STREET
ELEVATION



THE BLACKSTONE BLOCK

c1767

BUILT BY J. HANCOCK,
OCCUPIED BY BROTHER
EBENEZER DURING REV.
STORE FRONT ADDED, 1796
SINGLE STORY ADD'N
AT REAR: 1929
UPPER FLOORS INTER. ORIG.

NAT'L REGISTER
(ANTIQUE SHOP)

1835
"BLACKSTONE BLOCK"
BOSTON STONE IN
WALL FACING #10
(GIFT SHOP)

(c1835)
ORIG. 4-5 STORY
SIM. TO #141
HANOVER ST.
(RESTAURANT)

1916
A J CARPENTER, ARCH.
"CHICAGO STYLE"
WINDOWS
(RESTAURANT)

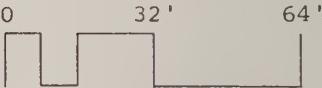


HANOVER
STREET

ALLEY
102

CREEK
SQ.

UNION
STREET



MARSHALL STREET
ELEVATION

G633B Waterfront

DATE

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